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RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 1975  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 3042  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2738  
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG 0378  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ULAANBAATAR 000654

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HQ PACOM FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ADVISOR (J007)

E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SCUL, SENV, SOCI, KMCA, KMDR, KPAO, MG, IZ  
SUBJECT: MONGOLIAN MEDIA FOCUSES ON PRESIDENTIAL VISIT, SUMMIT  
MEETING, MCC SIGNING, AND VISAS, VISAS, VISAS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The October 22-29 U.S. visit by President Enkhbayar and the Presidential Summit meeting resulted in extensive local press coverage. The \$188 million rail component of the \$285 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact gained considerable coverage, and the broader bilateral relationship eventually attracted media attention as well, although the local media remained fixated on visas and, more specifically, Mongolia's dreams of being included in the visa-waiver program. (NOTE: High refusal and overstay rates coupled with high levels of fraud have rendered Mongolia ineligible.) Now that the long-awaited MCC Compact has been signed by the two Presidents, it appears that visa-waiver (sometimes referred to here as "visa alleviation") attainment is the next goal in the minds of Mongolian journalists, with some Mongolian politicians and officials feeding that interest; many stories about President Enkhbayar's visit were based on information supplied by the Press and Information Office of the President's Office. Embassy press releases guaranteed accurate press coverage of the MCC Compact, the Joint Declaration of Principles, the Proliferation Security Initiative, and the MOU on preventing smuggling of nuclear materials. A subsequent Embassy press release on the visa waiver issue set the record straight. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) President Enkhbayar's October 22 to 29 visit to the United States received blanket coverage, with some media outlets framing his warm reception at the White House as an indication of Mongolia's growing international prestige. All major dailies and TV stations provided real time (despite the 13 hour time difference) as well as next day reporting on Enkhbayar's meeting with POTUS and their signing of the MCC Compact. Many also provided coverage of Enkhbayar's other stops in the U.S. beyond Washington D.C., including New York, Chicago, Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Los Angeles.

13. (U) Representative of much of this coverage was an October 24 article in the major daily Onooder newspaper. Although the article addressed a variety of issues discussed during the presidential summit, the headline was both misleading and lengthy: "Enkhbayar: 'The job of implementing the project successfully is waiting for us.' Bush: 'We are on track to solve the issue of Mongolian citizens to visit the US without visas'."

¶4. (U) The body of the Onooder article started off addressing the substance of the presidential talks, but quickly shifted to visa matters: "Discussed were developments in Iraq and the six-party talks on North Korea, as well as relations and cooperation between our two nations. President Enkhbayar brought up the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which has been discussed for some years but has not shown any results. President Enkhbayar asked for support from the U.S. President regarding this agreement. President Bush said he shares the desire to develop trade between our two nations. President Enkhbayar asked President Bush to include Mongolia in the countries eligible for the Visa Waiver Program. President Bush noted that this issue was raised during his 2005 visit and asked U.S. Ambassador to Mongolia Mark Minton why it has not been implemented. Ambassador Minton explained that for a number of reasons, including visa brokers, fake documents and overstays, Mongolia does not meet the criteria for inclusion in the program. President Bush explained that he will take the issue into consideration, and that he believes it will be solved positively for Mongolia. President Enkhbayar then invited President Bush to visit Mongolia again."

¶5. (U) Other major dailies, including Ardyn Erkh, Zuuny Medee, and the Ulaanbaatar Times, ran identical stories, drawn from a release by the Press and Information Office of the President's Office. Their headlines were similarly misleading: "George Bush: 'We are on track to solve the issue of Mongolian citizens to visit the US without visas'" (Ardyn Erkh); "George Bush: 'Why shouldn't Mongolia have visa alleviation?'" (Zuuny Medee); "George Bush: 'We are on track to solve the issue of Mongolian citizens to visit the US without visas'" (Ulaanbaatar Times).

¶6. (U) Ardchilal, a newspaper affiliated with the opposition

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Democratic Party, ran stories with more factual headlines, such as "Heads of State sign the MCC Compact agreement," and "The President could not solve the issue of visa alleviation."

¶7. (U) Ardyn Erkh ran another story -- "The Heads of State sign the MCC Compact" -- covering the signing ceremony, a brief introduction of the MCC and the different sectors in which MCC projects will be implemented (as well as the amounts of money allocated for each sector). The article also quotes President Bush as saying, "We are grateful to Mongolia and its people, who were there for us Americans in difficult times, and who participate in the international affairs we carry out (sic). One of the actions for which we are grateful is the sending of Mongolian troops to Iraq after the events of September 11. Mongolia is a close friend of mine and America's."

¶8. (U) Onooder also focused on Mongolia's prestige, with an article noting that President Enkhbayar would be interviewed by VOA and The Washington Times. (These interviews were organized by the Mongolian Embassy in Washington.) Onooder also ran a separate article under the headline: "President Bush has not forgotten the yak's milk," calling attention to President Bush's November 2005 visit to Mongolia. The article covered more ground than the headline might indicate, including remarks the two Presidents made before the signing of the MCC Compact, and drawing upon the US Embassy's press events to inform the Mongolian press about the MCC (including the screening of a video of the signing ceremony). The newspaper also published President Enkhbayar's itinerary.

¶9. (U) The Embassy highlighted the MCC Compact signing and bilateral cooperation with an October 5 pre-visit press roundtable and an October 23 MCC Compact roll-out press event as well as a follow-up roundtable with the Ambassador on November 14. Despite extensive efforts to focus attention on the MCC and bilateral agreements, including the roundtables and numerous press releases and web postings throughout the visit, the press continued to feed the visa-waiver frenzy.

¶10. (SBU) The November 14 roundtable reinforced a November 2 press release we issued to draw attention to actual US initiatives and to halt the unfortunate obsession with visas. Coverage of the

roundtable was included in the evening broadcasts of TV5, TV8, TV9 (rumored to be co-owned by President Enkhbayar), C1 TV, and MNTV (the only network with nationwide broadcasting). Meanwhile, major newspapers continued to focus on the visa issue. "Need to combat U.S. visa brokers" (Onooder); "Mongolia doesn't meet the criteria for visa waiver program" (Zuuny Medee); "The President alone can't decide the visa issue" (Odriin Sonin); "U.S. Embassy press release on the visa waiver program published" (Niigmiin Toli). An exception was Ardyn Erkh, whose headline declared: "The (U.S.) Embassy will work on people-to-people and economic relations in the coming 20 years."

11. (SBU) COMMENT: Journalists have long known that visa stories sell papers. Some journalists have suggested that Mongolia deserves special consideration for the visa-waiver program because it has dispatched troops to Iraq, and there is little understanding or perhaps more importantly acceptance that Mongolia too must meet U.S. legal requirements for the visa-waiver program. Despite the media's naive and enduring focus on visas, it reflects a popular and generally positive fascination with the United States. Despite the Mongolian press' misguided and often inaccurate focus on the visa situation, its coverage of President Enkhbayar's U.S. visit nevertheless increased awareness of U.S. engagement in Mongolia and contributions to its people. END COMMENT.

Minton